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FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2145
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001652

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/02/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DEFENSE MINISTER AKHALAIA SEEKS TO
REASSURE NATO AMBASSADORS OF CONTINUITY AT MOD

REF: A. TBILISI 1634

[1](#)B. TBILISI 1628

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Newly-appointed Defense Minister Bacho Akhalaia met NATO resident Ambassadors September 2 in a "getting-to-know" you meeting. Akhalaia stressed that there would be no change in MOD priorities -- NATO integration, modernization of the armed forces and "preserving the peace" were at the top of his list. He also noted that there would be a continuing emphasis and training and on contributing to peacekeeping operations, specifically stating that Georgian contributions to ISAF under the French (one company) and the U.S. (one battalion) would continue. Akhalaia praised the work of his predecessor and said that he would be naming his new team of deputies soon, although he anticipated making no other major changes in senior positions. When asked about tensions on the Black Sea with Russia and the de facto "government" of Abkhazia, Akhalaia said that Georgia would not respond to provocations, although he acknowledged that security on the Black Sea was under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs since the Georgian Navy had been subsumed into the Coast Guard early in 2009. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment. Akhalaia sought to make this a friendly meeting and wanted to make a positive first impression on the NATO diplomats, many of whom have been skeptical of the appointment. However, the Minister appeared uncomfortable with the assembled ambassadors; as Deputy Defense Minister he maintained a low profile with the diplomatic community and seemed to know few if any of the participants. He appeared to understand some English judging by his physical responses to some questions, but spoke only Georgian using an interpreter. The Minister was flanked by First Deputy Minister Muchaidze, who confirmed to DCM that he would remain at the Ministry only for a few more weeks until the NATO PARP process was complete. Akhalaia's message of continuity in policies and continued commitment to NATO integration, reform and peacekeeping operations was well-received, and many noted his stress on preserving the peace. Akhalaia's actions of the next few weeks will be closely watched here by the international community and the political opposition, who has objected to the appointment (ref a), and we will seek to make the point to the new Minister and the President about the importance of continued defense reforms. End Comment.

[1](#)3. (C) Defense Minister Akhalaia began his remarks by stating that integration into NATO and the continuing reorganization and reform of the Georgian armed forces will remain the Ministry's top priorities. He noted that the military had clearly taken important steps in this direction under his predecessor, and that he was committed to continuing these policies in the years ahead. Akhalaia said that his main priority was to move the Georgian armed forces closer to western and NATO standards. The Minister stated that Georgia would continue to contribute to international

peacekeeping operations, reiterating that plans would proceed for a Georgian company to serve in Afghanistan under French command and a Georgian battalion would serve there under U.S. command. He hoped that in the future, Georgia would be able to increase its contributions to international peacekeeping operations. The Minister said that the main principle for Operations. The Minister said that the main principle for him was to maintain stability in the Georgian armed forces. He stressed that there were many competent officers in the Georgian armed forces and then he thanked his predecessor again for his work.

14. (C) Taking questions from the assembled diplomats, Akhalaia called recent Abkhaz threats to sink Georgian shipping "provocative," but said that Georgian forces would "not respond to these provocations." When asked about responsibility for security on the Black Sea, Akhalaia acknowledged that MOD's role was "limited," because the Georgian Navy had been absorbed into the Coast Guard which was under control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA). He said that Black Sea security policy was under the "authority" of another Ministry.

15. (C) In response to another question, Akhalaia said that training for the armed forces was "most important" and something that he would work for. There was no reason to discuss new arms purchases yet, but once Georgian soldiers were better trained and better educated, they would need more advanced technology. The Minister declined to provide any details about his new team of deputies, stating only that there would be "no major changes in this regard," but that some deputies "had gone and he was negotiating with others to stay." (Embassy note. We understand that all the deputies

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but Muchaidze have already left, and Muchaidze said that he planned to depart the Ministry in a few more weeks. End note.)
TEFFT